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Exile and Return: Indian Jews and the Politics of Homecoming

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On May 14, 1948, Israel became a nation and opened its doors to Jewish immigrants from across the globe. Between May 1948 and December 1951 the tiny nation absorbed 684,000 people, doubling its Jewish population in three years. Never before in recorded history had so much ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity come to such a small geographical entity in such a short time to form a new collective. This essay documents how the Bene Israel, a Jewish community from India, came to Israel during this period of mass absorption, were dissatisfied with Israel, returned to India, and then once more left India and returned to Israel.

The Bene Israel, whose own tradition maintains that they have lived in India for more than 1,800 years, is the largest of the three major Indian Jewish communities, which also include the Cochin and Baghdadi Jews. The Bene Israel, numbering 20,000 at the height of their population in India, began to immigrate to Israel in 1948. By 1960, approximately 8,000 community members lived in Israel. Today, there are 75,000 Bene Israel in Israel and approximately 10,000 in India, mostly in Mumbai. For centuries, they lived in villages on the Konkan coast in the state of Maharashtra and self-identified as both Indian and Jewish. In India, Jews have lived primarily under the hegemony of Hinduism, one of the oldest religious traditions in the world, with over 1 billion adherents. Hinduism has existed almost exclusively in India, but in the modern period its adherents can be found throughout the globe.

The experience of Jews in India is unique. Jews in the diaspora lived almost exclusively in the Christian and Islamic worlds. Of all the religious traditions in the world, only two—Christianity and Islam—claim that the only way to salvation is through them. Neither Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, Sikhism, nor any other religion holds that nonadherents cannot find their own religious path. In both the Christian and Islamic worlds, Jews were subject to the hardships of antisemitism to varying degrees. Under Hindu hegemony in India, Jews had an 1,800-year history free of antisemitism. This was due primarily to the traditional Hindu understanding of conversion whereby one could not convert to Hinduism. A person was either born a Hindu or was not Hindu. One was welcome to live according to Hindu norms and attend
Hindu celebrations but could be a Hindu only by birth. Consequently, Jews never experienced any pressure to convert, and Judaism too is traditionally a nonproselyting religion. Jews never asked the Hindus with whom they lived in the villages and later the cities of India to convert, and thus Hindus did not see Jews as a threat. Jews lived peacefully with their Hindu brethren in India, and their religion was never perceived as detrimental to their lives.

Indeed, under British colonialism in the modern era, Jewish religious identity became a benefit. The British used a divide-and-conquer policy to control India. The British pitted Hindus against Muslims and ruled from above, running the colony with the assistance of two small minority groups, Jews and Parsis (Zoroastrians). By the turn of the nineteenth century, the Bene Israel held key positions as doctors, lawyers, civil engineers, civil servants, and high-ranking military personnel. Although India is not often associated with Judaism, under British rule Jews were instrumental in state affairs. In August 1947, however, nine months before Israel became a nation, the British left the subcontinent, the Republic of India was born, and Hindus once again became the hegemonic force. Jews did not fear for their safety, but they did wonder whether the Hindu majority would allow them, a tiny minority, to maintain their prestigious societal positions. The overwhelming belief was that the Hindus would not. When Israel became a state in 1948, many Jews in India, fearing not for their safety but instead for their lifestyle, decided to immigrate to the new nation. When they arrived in Israel, however, it was not at all what they had envisioned.

**HOMECOMING**

Israel’s early years were ones of great struggle. In fact, as late as 1956, Israel was regarded in many diplomatic circles less as a state than a kind of besieged refugee camp, frantically seeking to organize and defend itself amid awesome economic, social, and military difficulties. The sheer number of immigrants who had to be absorbed during the first three years far exceeded what the new nation could accommodate. To begin, there was nowhere to house the massive influx of people. Initially, army barracks left behind by the British were used. Barracks that in January 1949 housed 28,000 people accommodated 90,000 by December 1949. From there the nation turned to tents, and tent cities bloomed. This was not a long-term solution, so mahabarot, or transitional settlements, were created. Although envisioned as temporary housing, many mahabarot housed immigrants for years. The mahabarot were shacks made of
tin, corroborated steel, and plastic with no running water or electricity; food was cooked on kerosene stoves. They were little better than the army barracks.

The new nation also had to deal with grave social strife. The Jewish immigrants coming from almost every nation in the world did not yet share a language. Most immigrants did not know Hebrew and had to learn it. Conflict between communities arose as in the barracks, tent cities, and mahabarot; and Middle Eastern and North African Jews lived alongside European Jews. German Jews, who came from one of the most technologically advanced nations, lived with Yemenite Jews, who had never seen a clock or a watch before. The social strife became dire, and the communities eventually had to be separated as the cultural clashes became more pronounced. Ashkenazi Jews felt that Sephardic and Mizrachi Jews were backward, while Sephardic and Mizrachi Jews felt that Ashkenazi Jews were too cerebral, slavish to their watches and schedules, and the purveyors of terrible food.

Due to overcrowding, food shortages became severe and led to illness throughout the nation. In some of the reception camps, many children became ill. At one point, it was reported that 200 of 370 children in the Raanana camp were ill. During the winter of 1951, a visiting United Nations expert on nutrition stated unequivocally that he had encountered more cases of malnutrition in Israel than anywhere else in the world. One Bene Israel immigrant interviewed for this study (who wished to remain anonymous) recounted that his family moved to Israel with a healthy child, who became ill and died in a barracks reception camp.

With a lack of housing and nutrition also came a lack of jobs and schooling. In the first three years many immigrants sat idle, waiting for employment opportunities to emerge and schools to become functional. Often when jobs did emerge, they were only part-time or far from the homes of the immigrants. Sometimes the new immigrants had to travel far to work slept in other cities or locations, only returning to their families on the weekends. Giora Josephthal, the director of the Jewish Agency’s Absorption Department, was kept up at night by the conditions and scrambled against all odds to find solutions but claimed that there was “nothing to be done but quietly cry.”

RETURN TO INDIA

By 1951 some of the Bene Israel, who had an India free of antisemitism to return to, felt a strong desire to return to the subcontinent. Their conditions had become quite dire by that point. They lacked jobs, good housing,
education, and food (until 1952, rationing made both food and clothing scarce). Many in the Bene Israel community felt that the Zionist enterprise had made false promises. One letter found in the Central Zionist archives complains about the situation at the time: “we were informed [in India] that there was no shortage of work and that all were profitably employed on land and other projects. Now with errors of back pay, up to two to three months’ pay are overdue.”

Although not politically organized, the Bene Israel community began to stage protests and strikes in front of the Jewish Agency offices in Jerusalem seeking to be repatriated to India.

By late 1951 many Bene Israel children lived in a wretched state, undernourished and with few winter clothes due to the rationing that lasted until early 1952. To rectify this situation, the community held peaceful sit-ins on their kibbutzim and at the offices of the Jewish Agency, inspired by Gandhi's satyagraha [nonviolent civil disobedience] movement in India. On November 21, 1951, 150 Bene Israel, including children, 7 pregnant women, and a nine-day-old baby, held a hunger strike outside the Jewish Agency offices in Tel Aviv. A second protest at the same spot in March 1952 demanded repatriation to India. On May 11, 1952, the Bene Israel again demonstrated outside the office seeking repatriation. Protests recurred in 1954, once more demanding either repatriation or an immediate solution to housing, employment, and education issues.

While these protests by the Bene Israel always remained peaceful, the police, who were handling many different protest groups in Israel, did not always react peacefully. Physical violence during these protests came to a head in April 1956 at another peaceful sit-in outside the Jewish Agency office over unmet housing, work, and educational needs. Dr. M. Young of the Jewish Agency promised that the demonstrators’ needs would be met and asked them to disperse. The protesters disbanded and went to the offices of those who could make good on Dr. Young’s assurance, where they were told that the Jewish Agency did not intend to meet his promises. After appealing to every available government agency for help, the community resumed its peaceful protest. The official complaint report issued by the community records that the police battered all those present, including the elderly, the infirm, and children. A woman five months pregnant who was beaten by a police officer was taken to hospital, where she miscarried. Despite the violence, the protest continued. During the night more police arrived, assaulted the protesters more severely, forced them into police vans, and dumped them on the side of a road far from the Jewish Agency office. One young man was arrested and sentenced by a
magistrate to a month’s imprisonment. Some community members became too scared to protest for fear of violence.

The government of Israel, though, acquiesced and began the process of assisting the Bene Israel’s return to India. The government did pay their repatriation costs, and on April 2, 1952, an initial group of 115 flew back to India. Shortly thereafter, the Israeli government helped more Bene Israel return to India. The government would help the Bene Israel return to India throughout the 1950s. Upon arrival, however, the Bene Israel found that the situation in India was not as it had been.

When India became a republic on August 15, 1947, it did so under duress. In order to leave, the British partitioned the subcontinent into two nations, India and Pakistan. The partition of British India was a great trauma for the subcontinent leading to mass migration and mass communal violence and bloodshed. The trauma of partition—much like the trauma of the partition of British Mandate Palestine in the Middle East—was a great wound whose legacies and politics are still being played out today. (While Israel and Jews saw the partition of Mandate Palestine and the creation of modern-day Israel as the ultimate redemption after the Nazi Holocaust, for the Arab world that partition and its results are known simply as al nakba [the catastrophe]. The Israelis and Arabs would fight three major wars over the partition in one generation, followed by many smaller yet no less brutal military campaigns.)

The partition of British India was no less traumatic for India and led to incredible violence as Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs who had lived side by side in villages for centuries found themselves on different sides of the political divide. Violent episodes occurred sporadically until 1946, when violence in what is referred to as the direct day of action erupted and spread across northern India in some of the largest communal violence in the twentieth century. The direct day of action began on August 16, 1946, after talks between the British (led by Viceroy Mountbatten), Hindus (led by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru), and Muslims (led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah) failed to produce amicable results concerning the independence of India from British rule, especially in Jinnah’s view. In reaction to the breakdown in talks, Jinnah, speaking from his home in Bombay, called for protests, and events quickly escalated beyond what anyone could have foreseen. Muslims marched into the Hindu quarter of Calcutta and begin killing, looting, and raping. The Hindus responded in kind by marching into the Muslim quarter escalating the violence. The killings set off a chain of violence throughout North India that lasted until after the British left India on August 15, 1947.
The trauma of partition, however, did not remain limited to to violence leading up to Independence from British rule. The main trauma came after independence. On August 15, 1947, the British left India, setting borders and recognizing Pakistan as a Muslim home on the Indian subcontinent. Amid the violence set off by the direct day of action, people began to move en masse—the largest human migration in recorded history, with an estimated 10 million–20 million people moving. Hindu and Sikhs who lived in what had become Pakistan moved by the millions to India, and millions of Muslims, primarily in northern India, moved to the newly formed nation of Pakistan.

Neither side completely anticipated this migration. India’s Prime Minister Nehru expected some refugees coming from Pakistan to India—but not 4.7 million people pouring into the new nation. Pakistan’s government, led by Jinnah, while also anticipating some movement, never envisioned its doors opening to millions of Muslims throughout the subcontinent. Moreover, the Pakistani government never expected the majority of its Sikhs and Hindus to leave. Consequently, the unanticipated migration happened in a state of disarray. On foot and by donkey and oxcart, people simply fled the villages where their families had lived for centuries. They set off on many roads in two columns, one heading into Pakistan and the other heading into India. The migrants marched in the brutal August heat with no accommodations for basic needs. There were no toilet facilities, there was nowhere to sleep, and there was almost no access to water or food. Arial footage of this migration shows columns stretching out for fifty miles, followed by another fifty-mile column only a few miles behind.

Both India and Pakistan became independent during a transition from colonial to postcolonial rule at a moment of intense crisis, and their handling of the refugee crisis either bolstered or undermined the new states’ legitimacy. India built refugee camps and devoted time and attention to rehabilitation, creating among other organizations the Refugee Protection Society and the All India Refugee Welfare Association. However, the core principle of refugee rehabilitation in India was self-rehabilitation. The Indian government distinguished between the experience of being dislocated and the ability to survive in one’s new home without the government’s help. To achieve the latter, the government adopted the official stance that every able-bodied adult refugee had to find gainful employment, and no one willing to work could be denied the opportunity to earn a living. It was understood that the infirmed and the majority of women were not part of this enterprise, but a narrative of shame
regarding able-bodied men who did not work developed. Mohanlal Saksena, who served as minister of rehabilitation from 1948 to 1950, promoted the idea that if one had the energy and courage to accomplish the very difficult task of packing up all of one’s belongings and leaving home to move to a completely foreign nation, then surely that person, once arrived, had the ability to work for a living and help establish the new state. Those who still received financial assistance from the government after the initial period of settlement were seen as lazy, and the receipt of government aid became a disincentive and a demoralizing act. A refugee became a full member of the new state through the capacity for self-sufficiency.

Many refugees to India and the majority of the Indian population before partition were villagers and farmers. Most refugees quickly started to cultivate the land they were allocated. In addition, the areas newly populated with refugees needed communal work to function: canals had to be dug, roads had to be created or widened, and all the other infrastructure that the new population needed had to be constructed. Even as farmers worked their lands, they built much-needed canal systems to facilitate the growth of their land. Today there are no refugees from the partition in India. There are those who were refugees and the descendants of refugees, but they have all been absorbed.

In the aftermath of the partition, India sought to unify and become a state with a national identity based on secular and democratic principles. The constitution they created drew from the politically liberal states of the West and promised to “promote the welfare of the people by securing and promoting . . . a social order in which justice, social, economic, and political, shall inform all institutions of national life.” The constitution stipulated that no citizen should be discriminated against on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. The constitution guaranteed freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practice, and propagate religion, subject to the public order and morality. No institution supported by federal funds could offer religious instruction. While the constitution was a thoroughly modern document, India was plagued with an illiteracy rate of 86%, making its implementation challenging, if not impossible, in rural areas. The Bene Israel, if not aware of details of the new state’s laws, would have understood the challenges to a secular democracy in India, which had always prioritized religious identity. However, despite the trauma of partition and the challenges of implementing the new constitution and creating a secular liberal democracy, the transfer of power from British colonial rule to the new Indian government was peaceful.
The Congress Party led by Jawaharlal Nehru took power with the governmental apparatus remaining in place. The most important aspect of this government, certainly in the early years of India’s independence, was the Indian Civil Service (ICS), which changed its name to the Indian Administrative Services shortly after partition. This service oversaw the operation and functioning of what was to become the world’s largest democracy, including the revenue, railways, customs, income tax, foreign service, and state-level services, such as medical, health, education, and police. Second in importance to the newly formed nation was the highly disciplined and experienced Indian military, which had fought for the British in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Burma, Abyssinia, and Yemen as well as in both world wars.

Before moving to Israel, the Bene Israel had been very important players in both the ICS and the Indian military under colonial rule. Indeed, in the military the Bene Israel had enlisted in almost all of the native regiments in the Bombay presidency (a province that included what is today Gujarat, two-thirds of Maharashtra, northwest Karnataka, and parts of Pakistan) and held almost all the staff appointments and nearly half the native officers of each regiment for a century and a half. In the ICS, the Bene Israel had held key administrative posts and trusted positions as train engineers. However, in the new India, Hindus held these positions. The newly formed nation had done away with British rule, which had imposed a divide-and-conquer policy and prohibited Indians from rising to top positions. In the new India top spots were highly competitive and open to Hindus, who quickly filled them. Also, many Bene Israel who left their jobs to move to Israel found that during their absence, those positions had been filled by Indians who had remained in India. Thus, the Bene Israel who returned to India from Israel found their jobs and livelihoods gone. Finding the same type of high-ranking positions in the new India was extremely difficult.

It is worth taking a moment to underscore that the Bene Israel’s loss of positions was due not to any anti-Jewish sentiment but rather to a new situation where competition for the jobs they had vacated was fierce. An example of the absence of anti-Jewish sentiment can be clearly seen in the case of one Indian Jew who had remained and never moved to Israel. Jack Jacob was a member of the Baghdadi Indian Jewish community, not the Bene Israel community. Born in Calcutta in 1923, he rose to become a lieutenant general in the Indian Army. He is best known for commanding India’s Eastern Army in its victory over Pakistan in 1971 in a war that saw Bangladesh separate from Pakistan to become its own sovereign nation. Jacob served as governor of the Indian states of Goa and Punjab. The difference between Jacob and the Bene
Israel was that after India’s independence, he never left or gave up his position in the military and later, through hard work and the absence of antisemitism, rose in the ranks. In India, he is remembered as a national hero.

RETURN TO ISRAEL

As the Bene Israel who returned to India found that their jobs were no longer available and that the communities they left were no longer intact (many of their members had also moved to Israel), the returnees began to discuss going to Israel once again. They were not the only participants in this discussion. The Indian press developed an interest in the leaving and return of the Bene Israel. Picking up the story, the Indian national press portrayed Israel in a very negative light. In 1952 and 1953 during the repatriation of the Bene Israel community, the Indian press published articles accusing Israel of being a racist state. The claim of the *Times of India* and the *Bombay Chronicle* that “Indian Jews weren’t up to the mark” painted a picture of a racist Israeli state that would not accept the Bene Israel due to their skin color. The Bene Israel seeking to return to Israel fought these allegations, and by May 1953 the journals retracted their accusations in articles such as “Indian Jews Back Israel—Discrimination Denied.” Reprinted in many newspapers across India, this article reported that “Neither at work, nor socially, was there any trace of discrimination on account of color or origin. It is indeed contrary to the very spirit which inspired the creation of the state of Israel.”

The articles denying racism in Israel came after Lakshmi Menon, deputy minister of external affairs in Nehru’s cabinet, declared in the Indian parliament that “one of the reasons which prompted the Indian Jews to return from Israel to India was the colour bar.” A prompt response to the Indian government signed by fifty-eight Bene Israel returnees on May 17, 1953, denied any trace of discrimination in Israel on account of color or origin:

> We regret the controversy which attended our return to India—it was a confession of failure to come up to the high standards demanded by a pioneering country. As you are fully aware, there are many of us today who would like to be given another chance to take part in the great work of reconstruction that is in place there. Had we the means, many of us would have already been in Israel today. If the Jewish Agency gives us another opportunity and pays for our passage again, we would today be all going to Israel with a greater determination to make good. In the interest of truth, we would like
you and hereby authorise you to convey this letter to all concerned. We feel that the good name of Israel should not be sullied by unjustified criticism of its government or people.47

The Bene Israel community was dependent on the Jewish Agency, because most could not afford to reimmigrate on their own. Due to the cost to the Israeli government, their repatriation was not a high priority for the Jewish Agency. Over the next several years, however, most of the repatriated Bene Israel who sought to return were brought back at Israel’s expense, along with additional Bene Israel olim [immigrants to Israel]. On their return to Israel, housing, education, and work remained problematic, even if they felt that these issues did not result from racial discrimination.

While the challenges that Israel faced persisted for the Bene Israel as well as all Israelis, the situation had changed for the better by the mid-1950s, and there were signs of continued improvement. Production was on the rise due to a new economic policy implemented in 1952 and fresh infusions of foreign capital into the new state. Finance Minister Eliezer Kaplan understood that the newcomers’ plight was so acute that without economic growth, it would be impossible to transform them into committed citizens. This would require more government spending and economic infusions from abroad. To achieve these, the government took advantage of many economic opportunities from abroad, including reparations from Germany and economic ties to the United States. This economic assistance took many forms, including grants, soft currency loans, and Export-Import bank loans as well as technical assistance.48 From the early 1950s onward, this amounted to between $40 million to $60 million annually. Financial assistance from Jews abroad proved to be even more substantial than government loans. Charitable contributions from Jews abroad to institutions, such as the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Technion, the Weitzman Institute, and Hadassah Hospital, exceeded US$750 million from 1949 to 1961. By the late 1950s, life was still difficult but no longer grim.

CONCLUSION

One of the experiences that Jews share is being an oppressed minority. Most Jews grew up in homes where the stories of one’s family were often stories of persecution or nearly escaping persecution. This was almost a universal Jewish community experience. If you didn’t hear those stories in your own home, you were informed of them by the community you lived in. For many, they weren’t
stories but a grim reality of life. There were and are, of course, many positive shared experiences of the Jews, but the story of oppression is a common thread. In the first generation of Israelis, these stories and the memory of the Holocaust were acute. The Bene Israel, however, did not have that in common with their Jewish brethren in Israel. With the absence of antisemitism in India, the Jewish identity formation there would have been quite different. Indian Jewry did not go to Israel to escape persecution; they went for other reasons. Because they did not come to escape persecution, they would have had, as a group, less reason to endure the hardships of the early years.

Israel was in many ways created as a safe haven for a persecuted minority scattered throughout the globe. The Bene Israel were not persecuted. Also, with a hospitable India to return to, it would have been for many of them an obvious choice to return. The situation on the ground in Israel during the first few years was so dire that many communities vocalized the sentiment that if they had a place to return, they would. Most Jews, however, had no place to return to. Many of those who did, left. Many Jews who could go to Canada, the United States, England, and Australia left Israel in the early years, feeling that life in Israel was too challenging.

Jews from what had been Nazi-occupied Europe felt that they could not return, and many did not have anywhere to return to. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, over 250,000 concentration camp survivors were left in those camps after the war. The camps were turned into Red Cross refugee camps, but those people hoped and waited for Israel to become a nation so they could leave the camps and go to a new home.

For the Bene Israel, their options were very different. They had a place to return to, so it is not surprising that many of them did. When they returned to India and realized that they would rather be in Israel, they came back to Israel, this time with a much better understanding of the challenges the state was facing. Upon return to Israel, the Bene Israel have entered almost every field, have been a great addition to the state, and are Israeli in every way.

NOTES


5. Ibid., 8.


13. Ibid.


17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.


23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Central Zionist Archives, S42227.

26. Ibid.


29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.


35. Ibid.


37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.


41. Central Zionist Archives, S6/6327.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Central Zionist Archives, S6/6149.
